

# A year to celebrate: Milestones in early childhood care and education



In October 2008 Early Childhood Australia held its national conference in Canberra, marking 70 years of service to early childhood. This was one of many milestones this year, one of many reasons we in early childhood have to celebrate.

Early Childhood Australia's National Conference drew hundreds of speakers and delegates from around the country and the world to discuss and debate the practice and standards of early childhood. As was highlighted in Maxine McKew's opening address at the conference, 2008 has been a monumental year for early childhood. This year we have reached a turning point, where the variable quality of early childhood education and care and its administrative, legislative and funding complexities are finally being addressed in a purposeful and coherent way.

Of course, the task of creating high, nationally consistent quality across all early childhood services is not easy. So entrenched are the traditions and ways of operating within and across the states that designing and implementing an early childhood quality assurance system that is administratively straightforward and equitable for all services, children and families will be an ongoing challenge.

Ensuring that all children have access to preschool education in the year before school is a wonderful start, but no easy task in itself. The current range of conceptions and delivery of preschool education, funding sources, access and cost are bewildering; access to 'preschool education' and 'quality' mean very different things in different jurisdictions and for different children.

Of major concern are inequities in funding and attendant costs to families, and the different quality expectations for preschool education depending on location – including whether situated in traditional preschools, kindergartens or childcare centres.

Most striking, as I have often noted, is the variability of the professional credentials of staff, which makes it very difficult to assure the quality of early learning programs to parents, whatever their context. Unlike school education and other regulated services such as health care – with professional registrations to guarantee the qualifications, competence and character of practitioners – the lack of regulation and consistency across the early childhood sector leaves consumers vulnerable.

As Elizabeth Simpson highlights in her article on choosing child care, to date there is little guidance or assurance about quality. For a start, parents are often 'confused about who is trained and who isn't, as services use terms like "teacher" for room leaders who may not hold a four-year university qualification.'

**However, the current Commonwealth and state commitments to quality education and care for all young children, and to nationally focused planning around early childhood provision and quality will bring clearer specifications and structure around qualifications and competence that, in turn, will result in better education programs and outcomes for young children.**

Dr Sharon Goldfeld's introduction to the Australian Early Development Index sets out one way in which the Commonwealth Government is working towards clarity in early childhood education. When the Index is rolled out next year it will pinpoint strengths in communities, as well as areas for improvement in quality – for example, the need for better targeted children's services. It is an important step forward in understanding early development and education experiences and outcomes on a community basis.

Many of the articles in this issue of *Every Child* are written by keynote speakers from Early Childhood Australia's National Conference and, in one sense or the other, focus on quality – from Chris Sidoti's discussion on rights and advocacy and Ann Epstein's overview of the lessons we can learn from the HighScope curriculum, to Ferre Laevers and Julia Moons' practical advice on helping children to understand their own and others' emotions. Future issues will continue to spotlight the inspiring ideas of presenters from this landmark conference.

**In reflecting on the turning points of this year, it seems fitting that this issue ends with Muriel Bablett's article, a reminder of what was perhaps the first great milestone of 2008: the apology delivered to the Stolen Generations. Her article reaffirms the importance of building on the resilience of Indigenous cultures as a basis for developing children's resilience. She says that the 'best protection we can offer any child is to give them a sense of belonging. Culture can provide that sense of belonging and through that belonging, resilience.' This holds true for all children, at all times.**

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